THE RECOVERY.

A Story of Kentucky

(Continued.)

In August a letter arrived from Alicia, and it was now she who undertook to comfort and encourage. She wrote me to stand firm, that I had done no wrong, that the attack would pass and I would stand forth more completely the favorite of the State than ever before. My secret would be preserved, it must be, but if by any chance it should become known she would tell the truth to everybody, how she, not I, was to blame.

I read the letter with mingled emotions. Alicia did not yet know the world as I believed myself to know it, and I felt that she could do nothing, even had I been cowardly and selfish enough to let her make the trial.

My mind went back from Alicia's letter to the message of Elias. Its words were few and simple, but I could not get rid of them, they were continually before me and their import was heavy. The rapt mountaineer was yet a seer and a prophet to me, and all the attacks upon me did not have as much weight as his simple words.

It was the effect of my position to make me seek solitude. I wished to be alone, the faces of people annoyed me, and although I strove to overcome this desire I could not always do so. I do not think that the recluse is a happy man, nor that it is desirable on any account to be secluded, but the wish to shun observation was, at times, exceedingly strong and I fear that, by it, I incurred deserved wrath more than once. On self-examination I attributed this feeling in myself to cowardice, I hesitated to face critical or censorious looks, and the inference was not pleasing to my pride. The conclusion was confirmed by a talk that I had with Judge Wharton, whom I met as I strolled in a colitary path by the side of the river.

I had not been to his house in some time, and I had taken care to avoid him as I walked about the city. But on the river path we came suddenly face to face, and there was no chance to evade him. He stopped at once and held out his hand.

"I've not seen you in such a while, Mr. Clarke," he said in a hurt tone, "that I had began to fear I had given you offense, though unwilling on my part."

"If there were any offense," I said, "it is I who would give it to you, though it would be unwilling on my part too. There is no man whose friendship I value more highly."

"Come let's walk on together," he said and he changed his course to mine. Having met him I was glad now that he had chosen to go with me. Despite my avoidance of him I had missed his mental strength and the help of his keen, clear vision. Neither of us spoke for some time. By the side of us, almost at our feet, flowed a deep river, its surface flashing now in blue and green, then in gold and silver in the intense sunlight.

Over us toward the cliffs, the rocks often hidden by the trees and bushes that clung to the steep face.

"Mr. Clarke" said the Judge at last, "you are troubled by these attacks, it is natural that you should be. Speaking as an old politician, they seem to me to have a concerted origin. You are young and you have risen rapidly. You have made enemies and they are working against you."

"I think you are right in all that you say," I replied, "and I will admit to you that these attacks have hurt me very deeply."

"Then why not reply to them," he said earnestly. "Let me repeat the suggestion that I made to you some time ago. Don't be offended. I'm an old man, and I'm a good friend of yours."

I was far from being offended, and I knew moreover that the advice he gave me was good—I only wished that he knew I could not take it, and I wished somehow that he knew, too, why I could not take it.

"It seemed to me," I replied, "that I said enough in the campaign, when I told them what I had been."

"I know, I know; it was only a general charge they made then, but now they are explicit, and they specify a certain period. I'd answer them at once and shut their mouths forever."

I did not reply just then, but I repeated over and over to myself the phrase "shut their mouths forever." How I would like to "shut their mouths" forever, but, look and think as I would, could see or think of only one way and that was out of the question. Yes, out of the question! I could not tell the world the truth; it would ruin me, it might drag Alicia down with me and it would serve the good purpose of nobody. The one way was quixotic, foolish to the last degree, and I shut my teeth down upon each other with hard resolve. The good Judge saw my face and he misread it.

"I don't wonder that you're angry at them," he said with sympathy. "It's a misfortune of our politics that too many of us descend to low and vulgar attacks. We are too ready to believe evil about public men, but sometimes these things must be met."

His tone was quietly paternal and I said nothing to correct him in his error, while he seemed to feel that he had given sufficient hint, and turned the conversation. We walked on together for two or three miles and then turned, coming back at the same slow gait toward the town. As we reached the first fringe of houses he said:

"You'll dine with us this evening, won't you Governor? Come, we've missed you, and Mrs. Wharton is asking continually why you are ignoring us."

I could not decline such an invitation from people whom I liked so much, and at the appointed time I went to his house. Only we three were present, the Judge, Mrs. Wharton and myself, and to an outsider it would have seemed a family group. Here, at least, was no one to question me, or to suspect me, or to intimate in any manner that I was not what I should be. I breathed an air of friendship, confidence and faith, and it was inexpressibly grateful to me. I could not destroy such trust as this and make myself an outcast from such people as these. I had for the time a wonderful, lightness of spirit, a revulsion from my former depression, and it lasted until I came away. The judge followed me to his gate, and urged me to come again and often.

"You are a bachelor," he said smiling, "and you need company, Mrs. Wharton and I are old and we need the young, so you see each can help the other."

"I thank you and I shall do so," I replied, although not knowing whether I meant it.

But when I was back at the Executive Mansion my loneliness and depression settled down upon me, thicker and blacker than ever. I had been a fool to think I ever could escape the consequences of my original sin; it is said that all matter is eternal, and I suppose, too, that every act has its logical sequence which goes on forever. Seth came in on some little errand and he saw me sitting in my chair in an attitude of drooping despondency. He had never ceased to show me a doglike devotion which often touched me.

"You ain't happy, Mr. Clarke," he said, and he spoke in such deep sympathy that I could not resent his words.

"No, Seth, I'm not," I replied.

"An' you a big man, the Governor o' the State. I reckon its 'cause there's too many flies in the molasses here. Sometimes I wish we was both back on the farm, Mr. Clarke, with nobody to bother us."

I could not help smiling at Seth's assumption of a share in a heavy responsibility, but I felt through it his strong sense of personal attachment. Even if he were to know the full truth he would never swerve a hair's breadth in his loyalty and affection. I had no doubts at all of him and the knowledge made my heart warm to him.

"Place brings worry, Seth," I said with an attempt at cheerfulness. "You have a harder time here than you had at Carlton."

"That's so," he replied gravely. "I've got to keep all sorts of people from you here, and there wasn't no such trouble at Carlton. It's a hard world for us public men, Mr. Clarke."

I did not laugh, I did not even have any temptation to do so; on the contrary I felt keenly the support of his sympathy, and I said:

"We'll bear it the best we can, Seth."

"Yes, sir, we will," he replied cheerfully, and went on with his task. His trouble slipped from his mind like water over a dam, and I envied him. He too, had been in the penitentiary, but he never made any secret of it; on the contrary if the evil-minded introduced the subject to him he would boast of it in order to show the depths from which he had come and the heights on which he now stood. I can truly say that, at that moment, I envied poor Seth.

August days passed, and the attacks upon me thickened. My very silence now was an encouragement to my enemies, and I did not doubt that Harrison, Connor, Grey and Cobbett were using every means to incite them. Grey I heard was back again in Louisville and was full of malice against me both on personal and political grounds. He even dared, or sank so low as to make personal insinuations against his own wife, indirect and vague, it is true, but to the initiated clear enough. But the fat Cobbett was the most vociferous of the lot. Oh, he knew things about me, I was a fine specimen, I was, to be at the head of the government of a great State, coming suddenly from nobody knows where and pushing myself forward in the most shameless and unscrupulous manner! The truth would come out, it must come out at last, and when it did come out, people would realize how they had been tricked. Such were the reports that reached me, but whether he knew anything positive about me I was uncertain, but I did know that, if he learned the truth, it would make a luscious morsel for such a man as he.

Late in August, as I strolled across the deserted lawn of the Capitol I saw Jimmy Warfield coming over the brown grass and I hailed him gladly.

"Got to look up the records of a case in the office of the Clerk of the Court of Appeals," he said briskly. "Doesn't Frankfort look deserted? Why do you stay here in August? Why don't you come down to Louisville, and have a good time with your friends, one of whom I am?"

He spoke lightly, jestingly even, but his manner was unlike his words, and I noticed that he shook my hand with unusual fervor. Jimmy Warfield was seldom a demonstrative man, and I felt deeply grateful for this sign that he had rallied again to my defense—I could not interpret it otherwise.

"How long do you expect to be here?" I asked.

"Until to-morrow," he replied.

"Then come over and spend the night at the mansion with me. Come, its a favor; I'm lonesome."

He accepted promptly and about five o'clock in the afternoon joined me at the Governor's residence. I had left the Executive's office early, it being a slack day, and was there before him. His coming was like a fresh breath of wind, and he brought a new spirit into the old house. Even Seth who waited on us brightened up and cast off the load of public life. Warfield was in one of his rarest and finest moods, finding humor in everything and showing the gayest of spirits. In his presence and under his influence I felt young again; life seemed to be well worth the living.

I did not understand why Warfield was in such spirits; he and I had been almost as brothers and I knew that he felt intensely the bitter attacks upon me, now long unanswered. Apparently he was doing it all to please me and to make me forget. "Old fellow," I said to myself, "you are a true friend, if ever man had one, and I wish I knew how to repay you."

We ate dinner together and then we sat in my smoking room and talked over our cigars. The weather had turned somewhat cooler and a fire was lighted in the grate, not much, but just enough to throw out a mellow glow that both took away the chill and made the electric lights unnecessary.

I did little talking, but Jimmy gossiped long and agreeably, and from time to time he spoke of the people with whose fate my own was so inextricably woven.

"Harrison is in Louisville," he said, "and he is devoting himself to pleasure. I doubt whether he goes back to the Legislature—he could if he wanted to do so—but he seems to have become suddenly tired of politics, he is not a man who can take defeat. And, oh, by the way, the beautiful Pauline Harmon is there too, and he is in frequent attendance upon her. An odd man! I'd have sworn that he was in love with George Grey's wife and is yet for that matter."

Warfield relapsed into silence and smoked a reflective cigar, and I, saying nothing, did the same. It is God's truth that even then and in the full belief that he had raised the clamor against me I did not hate Harrison, and I should rather have seen Alicia his wife than George Grey's. Alicia was in Warfield's thoughts as well as mine as he said:

"I saw Mrs. Grey in Louisville a few days ago with the Guthries. A noble woman, Harry, and she seems to me to have acquired a new strength. I'm clumsy at telling my meaning, but I don't think, Harry, I ever before saw a woman so completely clothed in spiritual atmosphere; I don't mean any sanctimonious air, but the genuine moral greatness that belongs alike to great Pagans and great Christians."

Then he, too, had noticed the change in Alicia. But I had seen it also in a man, the Reverend Elias Peabody, and I would have given worlds to have learned it from either for myself.

"I think she could get a divorce from George Grey," said Warfield.

"No doubt," I replied, "but she will never seek it. She has certain beliefs that forbid her."

"They are in accord with the spiritual atmosphere that envelopes her," said he.

I was surprised that he should speak so of Alicia, knowing how I felt toward her, because Warfield was a man of great delicacy and of equal discernment, but I judged that he had some purpose, though what it was I could not surmise. Then the talk shifted away to other people and other things. The night grew cooler and the glow of the fire became deeper and more mellow. We sat long like two gossips and at a late hour Jimmy said:

"You'll speak at the Reunion won't you? It's your duty as Governor of the State and they want you anyhow. It's going to be my duty to ask you officially, and I want to prepare the way beforehand."

"Oh, yes, I'll come," I said.

"And do your best?"

"Why certainly," I laughed.

"That's good," he said with satisfaction. I noticed that he no longer said anything about the necessity of my answering the charges against me, and I judged that he had come over to my way of thinking, or at least to the way I seemed to think.

When we separated and sought our bedrooms it was past midnight, but I felt that I had been cheered and uplifted by his companionship.

CHAPTER XIX.

Thumbs Up or Down?

The Reunion of which Warfield spoke was a joint meeting of survivors of the great civil war from both sides, Northern and Southern. Their ranks had been thinning wofully of late, and, the fact that they had been former enemies making them better present friends, they had decided to meet together at Louisville which was fitly chosen as a border city, and the time was set for late September, when the weather would be cool and bracing.

I should never have dreamed of refusing to speak to these old men, after the custom of our country. It is true that some of them may not have been heroes, and even a few may have been impostors, but I am not one of those who take a pleasure in blackguarding the entire race. Of late a great fashion of attacking everything had grown up among us. Just as one Englishman when he was bored would say to another: "Let's go kill something," an American when he was bored would say to another: "Let's go expose something." It was exposure, exposure, until my ears grew weary and I did not believe the tenth part of it.

I repeat that I was tired of exposure, or alleged exposure, or exposure for a profit, and I prepared my speech with no desire to lecture these old soldiers and to tell them that they had fought in a bad cause, whichever side they were on, and that they had given further proofs of natural and inherent badness by living so long afterward. The personal and sympathetic side appealed to me and as I worked over my address, I forgot my personal affairs for the time being. I ceased also to give the newspapers more than a cursory glance, and many of the attacks upon me made no wound, because I did not see them or know of them.

The appointed time came, Jimmy Warfield ran down to Frankfort as a committee of one to escort me to Louisville, and we took the short ride on a pleasantly cool afternoon. Warfield was rather silent and seemed more than usually thoughtful, but I was glad of his presence and personal support. It had been some time now since I had faced a great audience, and I felt that I should encounter hostile looks if not worse.

It was almost dusk when we came into the station, and the usual crowd was about to see a Governor arrive. When I alighted from the train I heard a cheer and then the moment after it died the soft sibilant sound of a hiss, the most bitter of all sounds, the sound that the rattlesnake makes as he shoots his poison. Jimmy Warfield put his hand upon my arm.

"Don't mind it, Harry," he said. "It's some vicious scamp with nothing better to do."

"I don't mind it," I replied.

But I did mind it. It was the rattlesnake's poison in my veins.

The hiss was not repeated and my friends and a committee of the old soldiers came forward to greet me. Here was no lack of spontaneity or heartiness and my hand was shaken with great enthusiasm, first by the veterans, upon every one of whom time had set a very deep seal. It was an affecting thing to see these white haired old men who had fought against each other, now clinging together for companionship and for strength to resist the assaults of years. After them came younger men, friends of my own age or near it and among them I saw the handsome, priestly face of Guthrie, the young member of the Lower House of Congress from the Louisville District and my exceedingly good friend. We shook hands warmly and then the group moved on to the carriages.

(To be Continued.)